

## CAESAR'S TAXES: TRINITY LIFE

Matthew 22:15-33

### **Introduction**

#### **The context**

Jesus was in a dangerous place. He has challenged the leaders of the people since his entry to Jerusalem. Now they return to counter-attack. The first verse of the reading makes that clear. They laid plans to trap him in his words (15). This was not a mind game or a word game. It was a deadly game – a game of cat and mouse that would see the end of Jesus. The cross is the shadow over these debates.

The presence of not only the Pharisees but also the Herodians and the Sadducees heightens the sense of foreboding. They were the legal and political hitmen. Politics is now a clear and present danger. The coercive regime of violence and death can and will act against him.

So they ask him four loaded questions, two of which we heard read today. The first question about taxes is a 'gotcha' question. You can imagine a tabloid journalist asking it. Answer yes or no please. Whichever way Jesus answers there is trouble for him.

The second question about the resurrection is designed to make the asker look superior and the responder, Jesus, foolish. Matthew combines these questions so that they form part of an answer to the unasked question; Who is Lord? Who rules?

The interrogators flatter Jesus calling on his well known integrity.

“Teacher we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” (16)

Should they pay the poll tax to Caesar or not? It was an oppressive tax. One of the most resented taxes the British imposed in Kenya was the penny hut tax. You must pay a penny tax for being alive. Where do I get a penny? From a British farmer of course. It forced people into becoming fodder for European labour on farms and other industries. It is a tax for just being there, a poll tax.

The greater problem was that the poll tax imposed on non-citizens had to be paid with Caesar's denarius. It bore his likeness and an inscription such as “Tiberius Caesar, August son of Augustus, high priest.” The Jews considered the image idolatrous and the inscription, blasphemous.

After calling them hypocrites, Jesus plays a little trick of his own and asks for a coin which they duly produce out of their pockets. Jesus does not possess such a coin. Whose head and inscription is on it? The emperor's, of course! So much for their sincerity! Here they were producing an idolatrous and blasphemous coin in the midst of the temple. They had declared their treacherous, political hand.

Then comes the famous

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God's.” (21)

### **Two realms or one loyalty**

This clever single response does not give a yes-or-no answer but opens up a new way of thinking and looking at things through the lens of God's empire.

The basic principle that Jesus enunciates here is that they should send back to Caesar his idolatrous coins, where they belong. Just as Jesus does not know a distinction between politics and religion, he does not know any distinction between politics, economics and the worship of God. He is putting the question: Whose servants are we?

Is Jesus saying that there are two realms? One is Caesar's and one is God's the two don't have anything to do with each other. So are we to live with divided loyalties?

If Jesus was anything other than a monotheistic Jew I'd say that's what he was saying. If that were true then we could separate out the political and the religious like two draws in a dresser, fill one with socks and the other with smalls and never mix them. Churches have done that, most notably in Nazi Germany but we do it all the time.

Politicians love the theory, of course, and it fits the compromise we Christians have made for the last 300 years. Stay out of the public sphere and we will let you, so the pollies say, live comfortably in the private realm. Religion after all is like joining a gym, its all about taste and choice in the private realm. We will trot you out when we need you for public occasions.

A monotheist on the other hand would say, 'Surely all things are God's if God is God and God is one.' I think that is what Jesus meant.

This is not a blueprint for a theocracy. Caesar's realm has its own authority under God's empire to bring justice and peace in the world. In the empire of God it is both instrument and servant. That it prefers hatred and violence, oppression and alienation becomes the matter that Jesus addresses on the cross.

### **Jesus' vision of the kingdom**

I think that the words of Jesus are subversive. They imply that in all things I will seek God's will and that will entail measuring all things in

private and public life, including governments, by the vision Jesus has given us of the kingdom of God.

God's compassion knows no bounds. God's justice for the marginalised is a rule of life. God envisages peacemakers as those who bring wholeness of life to others. The kingdom is theirs. God's passion for putting human relationships right is a dominant theme. God's energy for reconciliation and healing drives Jesus to the cross. Such a vision will be an irritant to regimes that think otherwise; it will stand in conflict with violence and oppressors whoever they are, Christian, Muslim, Republican, Green, Liberal, or Labor. Those labels do not matter.

This passage exposes the fallacy of dividing reality into God's area and other areas. Many realms demand a piece of our lives, but God's realm demands the whole of our lives and that we make every other realm subordinate to it. It applies equally to our personal spirituality as to the great questions of the day.

### **How shall we render to Caesar and how shall we render to God?**

Let me see if I can put it another way. How can we live out Jesus' vision of the kingdom in such a way that the events of our world become a point of healing, peacemaking, and reconciliation instead of a cause for hatred, for further violence?

First of all, how can we become a microcosm of the kingdom here and now? How will that vision work among us? Only when we apply ourselves to that task will we have integrity.

After that, how will we become a place of healing, and reconciliation, wholeness and peace? How will we become pure in heart in this matter? In seeking to respond we become truly subversive for we undermine all violence and hatred. We undermine the passion of all the -isms that inflame the human heart. It may be extremely costly as it was for Jesus.

So the Pharisees lose round 1.

**So then it is the Sadducees turn to ridicule; a resurrection? Give us a break. Let us show you how ridiculous that idea is**

If you can't destroy someone one way then let your enemies have a go. The Pharisees disagreed with the Sadducees on the matter of the resurrection. But when your enemy is mine too who cares about truth or ideological difference. Focus on the enemy. The enemy is Jesus.

The Sadducees let their imagination flow freely in the bizarre scenario they pose to Jesus. One wife, seven husbands all in the resurrection, a recipe for chaos. The basis is Deut. 25.5, a law designed to protect families' inheritance in the land in ancient Israel.

They don't understand the God they worship in the Temple. They don't because their ideology won't let them read scripture carefully enough, paying attention to the nature of their God.

Jesus is the master of scripture and he will not let them get away with their ridicule or ideological interpretation. Jesus coming has changed everything and nothing. God has always been the God of the living but now that will find a whole new interpretation in Jesus cross and resurrection.

The power of God is the power of creative life, the life of the Spirit. Resurrection names God's refusal to abandon us in death. He gives us the creation gift of life that He then sustains in the Spirit, including our continuing life with God.

What we know about resurrection is what we are privileged to witness in Jesus' victory over death. Thus the Father, through the Son, subjected all things that gain their power from death to the Son, making it possible for us to share in that subjection through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Resurrection means that we pass into a new world order where death is left behind. This is the very opposite of reincarnation, the endless cycle of birth and death. In resurrection Death is no more. We are beings so full of the Spirit's life death cannot touch us. That is how Paul speaks of the Spirit among us now.

And that is the link between the two questions. Caesar gains his power from death-dealing. Jesus' resurrection subjects that power to the Lord of Life.

## **Conclusion**

Everything Jesus says is revolutionary but not like revolutionaries we know. The empire of God will defeat the empire of Caesar not with weapons but with a cross. There redemption is displayed.

But the revolution proceeds with the Spirit raising Jesus from the dead. That deathless power of God's New Age sweeps away all the empires that rely on death to keep them in place.

As Ps 99.1 says, "The Lord is king; let the people tremble."